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President Clinton's Defense Spending Increase: Long Overdue, But Less Than Meets the Eye

President Clinton has finally realized that Republicans — to say nothing of his top military advisers — are right: defense spending must be increased. Of course, Republicans have always supported a strong military. At every opportunity, Republican Congresses have added billions of dollars to the amount President Clinton had wanted to spend on our military. Such increases were necessitated by this Administration's repeated slashing of the defense budget, and this President's eagerness to send U.S. troops anywhere in the world, regardless of whether such deployments were critical to U.S. national security interests.

President Clinton has been making U.S. troops do more with less since he took office. For instance, when Clinton took office, the Pentagon's budget was some \$300 billion. By 1997, that number had fallen to \$254 billion (or \$224.7 billion, holding inflation constant), an incredible 25-percent drop in real economic terms — and this in an era where federal spending otherwise grew by some 16 percent. Perhaps some would suggest that with the end of the Cold War, the nation can neglect its armed forces until an emergency arises. But the prudent person will argue that in a constantly changing world, it is wiser and cheaper to maintain a small, high-quality force that can snuff out many kinds of problems before they wound vital U.S. interests — or kill thousands of innocent people. President Clinton's defense budgets have been woefully inadequate to meet critical U.S. security needs. In the meantime, the President has used our forces for a variety of non-traditional missions which have little relation to U.S. vital interests, but which create evident strains on military readiness. During his tenure President Clinton has used U.S. forces abroad 45 times.

The President's Plan: Less Than Meets the Eye

Now along comes President Clinton saying he will increase defense spending \$110 billion over six years, with a \$12-billion bump-up in 1999 alone. He would like us to believe that this funding boost will solve our military readiness problems.

Even on its face, the President's proposal falls far short of the recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In September of 1998, they testified to a need for \$148 billion more over six years, with an increase of \$17.5 billion this year alone. And the \$17.5 billion funding level excluded the amount needed for pay raises and enhanced benefits, which brings the total requirement to \$20 billion. Overall, the President's defense spending plan is at least \$40.5 billion

less over six years, and \$8 billion less in 1999, than the levels outlined by the Joint Chiefs only four months ago.

In more recent testimony this year, however, the Joint Chiefs claimed the additional funding in the President's budget will meet the Services' "most critical needs." Yet they also were forced to admit that the Clinton plan would mean further postponements in building new barracks, repairing bases and upgrading military equipment.

But a closer look at the President's proposed budget reveals that our military will get even less of an increase than the Administration claims. First, recognize that the Administration's \$278.4 billion budget figure already includes approximately \$8 billion in supplemental spending Congress approved last year. Second, the Administration's anticipated FY 2000 budget request will be lower than Congress' final appropriation for the National Defense Budget function for FY 1999. Third, the \$12-billion figure is not an increase in actual spending since only about \$4.1 billion is "actual" money already designated for much-needed pay raises and benefits, and for the continued presence in Bosnia. The remaining approximately \$8 billion comes from uncertain funding sources and budget gimmicks — savings from lower oil prices and low inflation, which may not materialize and/or could dissolve at any time.

The Consequences of Clinton's Policy

This policy has had a devastating impact on the status, readiness, and welfare of our fighting forces. As early as 1994, then Defense Secretary William Perry admitted that 3 of the Army's 12 divisions were not fully combat-ready. News reports blamed this readiness gap on the Clinton Administration's use of the military for non-traditional missions, including helping refugees in Rwanda and attempting to restore democracy in Haiti. Just ten months prior to this admission, President Clinton assured our troops that, "From the day I took the oath of office, I pledged that our Nation would maintain the best equipped, best trained, and best prepared military on Earth" [State of the Union Address, 1/25/94].

Despite lofty pledges from the President, our military continued to face readiness challenges. And the readiness problems didn't stop President Clinton from sending, in late 1995, 20,000 U.S. troops to Bosnia-Herzegovina. The defense secretary firmly assured Congress and the American people that U.S. troops would be home within a year and the cost might reach \$1.5 to \$2 billion. U.S. troops remain in Bosnia today and costs are now expected to reach \$9 billion this year, yet with no end in sight. During a Senate Armed Services Hearing in 1998, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry Shelton refused to provide Senator McCain with a time-frame, within five years, for when U.S. troops would end their mission in Bosnia. In the Persian Gulf, U.S. forces continue a cat-and-mouse game with Saddam Hussein, with the buildup in November of 1998 costing U.S. taxpayers over \$1 billion, and still inspectors are being denied access to suspect Iraqi facilities.

The increasing operational tempo began showing strains on the military: U.S. troops were sent on back-to-back deployments, maintenance crews were forced to cannibalize aircraft, retention rates continued to drop and recruitment goals went unmet.

Readiness in the News

By 1998 U.S. military readiness was nearing the breaking point. Consider the following news accounts:

- March:** "Pilots Flying Away from Military: Better Pay in Private Sector, Easier Duty Fueling Exodus." [*Washington Times*, 3/24/98]
- July:** "Millions Spent, But Military Housing Still in Bad Shape." [*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 7/15/98]; "Navy Pilot Retention At Lowest Level in Program's History," [*Inside the Pentagon*, 7/30/98]
- August:** "Military Readiness, Morale Show Strain." [*Washington Post*, 8/13/98]; "Military's Early Discharge Rate Soars." [*Washington Times*, 8/13/98]
- September:** "Shortage of Sailors Erodes Navy's Readiness For Combat." [*San Diego Union-Tribune*, 9/2/98]; "Less and Less Ready: An overstretched, underfunded military." [*San Diego Union-Tribune*, 9/7/98]; "Little Appetite for Food Stamps: Military Families Fight Civilian Pay Gap and Growing Needs." [*Baltimore Sun*, 9/8/98]; "Wanted: A Better Quality of Life: Soldiers Give Cohen an Earful on Pay, Retirement." [*Army Times*, 9/14/98]; "Cohen, In Boston, Repeats Warning of 'Fraying' Readiness." [*Boston Globe*, 9/18/98]; "Pilot Shortage Prompts Concern," [*San Antonio Express-News*, 9/30/98]
- October:** "Navy Hit by Shortage of People, Planes, and Parts" [*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 10/26/98]
- November:** "U.S. Troops Pay Price in Cycle of Deployments." [*Los Angeles Times*, 11/16/98]; "Today's Military Tougher on Families," [*USA Today*, 11/27/98]

The Joint Chiefs Called to Respond

With mounting evidence of a looming readiness crisis, despite assurances to the contrary by the Joint Chiefs just seven months earlier, Senate Republicans in September of 1998 summoned the top military officers to testify before the Armed Services Committee. Here is a sampling of what they said:

- When asked about the Pentagon's recent risk assessment, which increased from medium to high the risk to U.S. soldiers in trying to wage two simultaneous wars, Chairman Shelton admitted, "while the risk says that the U.S. will prevail, but [sic] it will in fact take us more time, and that time of victory would mean that we would lose terrain that we subsequently would probably have to regain. It means that our casualties to the U.S. would be high."
- Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael Ryan allowed that the Air Force would be 700 pilots short in 1998. Using equivalent projections over the next few years, the shortfall would reach 2,000 by 2002.

- Marine Corps Commandant General Charles Krulak highlighted how the “funding migration has prohibited us from timely replacement of our aging equipment and infrastructure. Much of our equipment is aged beyond its projected service life. . . . Where we once replaced simple parts such as brake shoes, we now find ourselves replacing entire brake assemblies. This costs more money, causes the equipment to spend more time in the shop, and is lost to the unit for combat training.”
- Admiral Jay Johnson, Chief of Naval Operations, gave the Committee his assessment of today’s Navy, which “continues to sustain a very high operating tempo. This morning, 56 percent of our ships are at sea, and 31 percent of them, with 52,000 sailors, are forward-deployed. And we’re doing that with 336 ships. . . . We’ve responded to some 108 contingencies or national taskings in the past 102 months, with just 15 in the last six months alone....No decrease in this OPTEMPO is foreseen. In fact, it’s my judgment that as we get closer to 300 or 305 ships, that tempo’s likely to increase.”

The outcome of the hearing: the Joint Chiefs cited a requirement to increase defense spending by \$148 billion over six years. In 1999 alone, the top military chiefs set a requirement of about \$20 billion in additional funding.

The GOP Plan

Republicans, acknowledging the readiness problems created by the Clinton Administration’s overcommitment and underfunding of our military, have added defense dollars to critical readiness and modernization accounts at every opportunity.

Now to retain the best and most experienced soldiers, Senate Republicans have introduced S. 4, the Soldiers’, Sailors’, and Airmen’s Bill of Rights Act of 1999. This bill:

- Includes a 4.8-percent pay raise in 2000 and provides future pay raises to close the gap between military and civilian pay;
- Reforms the basic pay tables by targeting grades where retention is critical;
- Provides special assistance to help the neediest families in the armed forces;
- Reforms the retirement system by providing personnel the option, after 15 years of service, to choose between the pre-1986 retirement system, which provides a 50-percent base salary multiplier with full Cost of Living allowances, or a one-time \$30,000 bonus to remain under the current 40-percent base salary multiplier;
- Allows service members to contribute up to 5 percent of their pre-tax base pay to a Thrift Savings Plan, and authorizes the Service Secretaries to offer a matching contribution of up to 5 percent for six years in return for a six-year commitment to remain in the service.

The Republican goal: to provide our service men and women and their families the same quality of life that all American citizens enjoy. This bill will meet the most basic needs of our men and women in uniform.

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